

ORIGINAL

W.S. 895

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 895

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Harold McBrien,  
Drumduff,  
Ballintogher,  
Co. Sligo.

Identity.

O/C. 8th Battalion, Sligo Brigade, I.R.A.,  
1919-1921.

Subject.

Activities of 8th Battalion, Sligo Brigade,  
I.R.A., 1919-1921.

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STATEMENT BY MR. HAROLD McBRIDE

REAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

Drumduff, Ballintogher, Co. Sligo.

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I have lived in this district since I was very young. This part of the country always had a very strong organisation known as the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and also a strong Unionist or Orange element. There was an Orange Lodge in Bohey, not far from here.

When the National Volunteers were started here prior to the first world war I became a member of that organisation and got some experience in training which was useful to me afterwards. The rebellion of 1916 saw the end of the National Volunteers here and after that there was nothing doing for a long time. Towards the end of 1917 a few of us got together and started to organise a company of the Irish Volunteers locally. We did this all on our own and without outside assistance from anyone. We got together about fifteen members and we met and drilled in secret. By popular vote I was appointed company captain; Ned Mulrooney was appointed 1st Lieut. and Paddy Coleman 2nd Lieutenant. The members were sons of farmers and labourers and we paraded a few times per week. I had a smattering of training experience from the National Volunteer time and, with this and by studying British Army Manuals which I procured, I undertook the training of the company.

We had no arms whatsoever, but we made wooden imitation rifles with which we carried out our foot and arms drills. Towards the end of 1918 companies were started in Dromahair, Newtown Manor, Killarga and Killavoggy. A meeting was held in the Hall in Newtown Manor and a battalion was organised of the units mentioned. Charlie Timoney was appointed O/C. of the battalion and I was appointed second in command.

In the early part of 1918 the conscription crisis was developed and the volunteers were preparing to meet this threat. There was a considerable increase in our strength as a result of this, but most of this faded out again when the crisis was over. The Volunteers were instrumental in having the anti-conscription pledge signed by the people, and a record was made of all available food supplies in the area. A branch of Cumann na mBan was organised and they set about making first aid equipment such as bandages, etc.

In the latter part of 1918 the General Election took place and an amount of work in connection with this was performed by the Volunteers, such as canvassing, arranging transport, protecting speakers, guarding ballot boxes and polling booths, etc. The A.O.H., as I said, were very strong in this area and the Volunteers had a severe job to keep them in check or they would have overwhelmed the voting.

Early in 1919 the Déil met and from then on we became the army of the Republic (I.R.A.), but the designation of Volunteer remained to the end. We now took an oath of allegiance to the Republic which was subscribed to by all members. Companies were now formed in Ballingar and Greaghafarne. The Volunteers were now called on to perform a lot of police duties as the people - or a great deal of them - no longer recognised the R.I.C. as a police force. Sinn Fein Clubs were organised throughout the area and in some cases these clubs took over land compulsorily for tillage purposes. The Volunteers had, of course, to do this work and regulate the matter, and arrests in connection with this were made both by the Volunteers and the R.I.C. In many cases this worked out very well and the owners

were paid for the use of the lands so acquired. In some cases the people who were being given the lands got cold feet when the R.I.C. intervened and did not go ahead with the project.

The Battalion O/C., Timoney, was arrested some time around the end of 1919 and I then took over charge of the battalion. He did six months in Belfast Jail. During this time a brigade was organised in the Co. Sligo and we now became the 8th Battalion, Sligo Brigade. William Pilkington - now Father Pilkington, C.S.S.R. - was the Brigade O/C. When I took over the battalion it consisted of the following units - Ballintogher Company : Captain Michael Mulligan. Dromahair : Captain Charles Canning. Newtown Manor : Captain Charles Timoney, who on his release from jail took over the company again. Ballingar : Captain Thomas O'Connor. Killavoggy : Captain Patrick Hannon. Greaghafarne : Captain Patrick O'Rourke.

Another company was organised in Glenn in 1920 and the captain here was John Owens. The paper strength of the companies were, approximately, Ballintogher 50; Dromahair 30; Newtown Manor over 80; Ballingar 40; Greaghafarne 84, and Killavoggy about 64. Glenn about 30. The effective strength would of course be less than this.

Regular brigade meetings were held which the brigade staff and all battalion commandants or their representatives attended. "Ginger" O'Connell, afterwards Colonel O'Connell of the army and who was a Sligo man, held classes and lectures in the Sinn Féin Hall in Sligo. O'Connell had served in the American army. All brigade and staff officers and battalion commandants and company commanders attended these classes and lectures.

In June 1920 an attack was made on Fivemilebourne Barracks (R.I.C.). This was a brigade operation and the rifles were supplied by the brigade. Captain Timoney and Lieut. Frank McGoldrick of Newtownmanor Company took part in this attack. Some of the Dromahair Company also took part and were engaged in blocking roads, etc. The barracks was not taken. The police evacuated the barracks after this and it was then destroyed.

In 1920 also a plan was made to capture Ballintogher R.I.C. Barracks. Thomas Dignan, who was O/C. of the 5th Battalion, was to be dressed a sergeant of the British army and Bofin was to be dressed as a British army officer. They were to arrive in a motor car and to get access to the barracks and then to keep the door open while we, who had in the meantime, concealed ourselves around the barracks, were to rush it. When we got to Ballintogher the police were on lorries on their way to Sligo having evacuated the place. So we just missed capturing them. We did not destroy this place as the landlord or owner proceeded to live in it himself. The only other police barracks on the area was Dromahair. This barracks was not evacuated and contained a strong garrison of twenty five to thirty men and was strongly fortified. We made a reconnaissance of this post with a view to capturing it, but decided it was beyond our capabilities, considering the material we had at our disposal and it was increasingly hard to get into any of these places now by a ruse.

About October 1920, I was one of a number selected to take part in an attack on a convoy at Sligo railway station. Captain O'Rourke of Greaghnafarne Company accompanied me. We assembled in the Sinn Fein Hall in Sligo. Joe McDevitt was in charge of this operation and there was supposed to be a party of fourteen or fifteen available, with a motor

car to take the captured arms away. On a roll call being held it transpired that only ten had mobilised and there was no motor car. We now received orders that we were to grab all the arms we could and then take to our heels and make a get-away. The attack was to be made on a British army horse wagon which was wont to proceed from the jail to the railway station twice weekly to collect foodstuffs. The wagon was always escorted by a party of military on foot. We were armed with revolvers of different calibre and a very small supply of ammunition. We were to attack them as they entered the railway station. We waited in the hall until the wagon and escort passed by on its way so that we would know the dispositions.

While we were still in the hall the wagon with an escort of fourteen men under an officer passed towards the station. We left the hall and proceeded to the station and took up positions there. We proceeded by a shorter route than the escort so that we would get into position before they arrived. A chap from Sligo and I took up position inside the station gate while the remainder of our party positioned themselves outside. To our amazement, the wagon and escort never arrived at the station, but instead a motor car with two police, apparently unarmed, arrived and proceeded to collect the foodstuffs. We let the police enter the station and leave again without interfering with them. It would not have availed us anything to do so. I do not know what happened that the escort did not turn up. I believe they were stopped and warned while en route. This of course is only surmise on my part. We now dispersed and made for home with our confidence a bit shaken.

A general raid for arms was carried out in 1920. All houses that had weapons of any kind or were suspected of having any were raided by our men and such weapons were

collected. While most of those weapons were given up voluntarily by the owners, resistance was met with in a few cases, and in the Killavoggy area we were fired on but, fortunately, no one was hit. The arms that could be collected in this area were very limited and, all told, only a few shotguns were procured and a small supply of cartridges.

During all this time the Sinn Féin Courts were functioning very successfully and were being widely used by the people. These Courts were organised by the Sinn Féin organisation, but most of the Volunteers were also members of this organisation and a great part of the work in connection with them was performed by the Volunteers. The Volunteers were responsible for the safety of the Courts while they were sitting, and also to see that the findings, decrees and sentences imposed by the Courts were put into effect. The Volunteers were required to act as summons servers, make arrests and detentions. This placed a great burden of work on the Volunteers who had little time to spare for such activities, but they got through it cheerfully and efficiently.

The Belfast Boycott, as it was known, was also a source of much work for the Volunteers. A lot of Belfast goods came into this part of the country through Enniskillen and altogether we carried out ten or twelve raids on the railway and removed all boycotted goods. We also raided shops that were selling Belfast goods. The goods collected were usually destroyed, but in some cases they were sold and the monies put into our funds. We of course made good use of cigarettes when we found them.

About February 1921, an ambush was planned for the Five Cross Roads. A patrol of R.I.C., ten to fifteen strong, mounted on cycles, were wont to go to Drumkeeran on fair days. Drumkeeran R.I.C. barracks had been evacuated. The police

had two roads to get there and they usually went one road and returned by the other. If we took position on one of the roads we might get them in the morning going to Drumkeeran and if not it was a case of waiting until they came along in the evening. We got six rifles from Brigade headquarters and three men from Sligo and ten or fifteen rounds per rifle. About ten or twelve of this battalion armed with shotguns and cartridges loaded with buckshot were also mobilised for the affair. Commandant Deignan from the 5th Battalion and ten or twelve men also armed with shotguns and some small calibre rifles came over to assist us. We got to the selected position about 2 a.m. on the morning under cover of darkness. We took position on the side of the road - the shotgun men behind the fence with the rifle men about thirty yards back from the road behind another fence.

Nothing happened in the morning and as the day wore on we learned that the police had gone into Drumkeeran by the other road, so it was a case of waiting until evening for them. Day wore into evening and evening towards night but no patrol turned up. The patrol had returned by the road it had gone in the morning leaving us high and dry. This was most unusual and the patrol had never done this before. It looked suspicious and seemed to indicate that they had been tipped off by someone not to return by this route. However, we do not know and probably never will. It may have been just luck on their part. So once again we had to disperse, disappointed with our attempt. We reckoned we would have captured the lot had they come and as this patrol always carried rifles and revolvers we would have got a decent haul.

In March 1921 an attempt was made to capture Collooney Barracks. This was situated in the 7th Battalion area but was a brigade operation. We were requested to provide a party



of four or five good reliable men for this operation. The Vice Commandant, the Adjutant, Patrick Coleman - an ex-R.I.C. man who had joined the I.R.A. - Charlie Mulligan and John James Kelly and myself, as far as I remember, formed this party. We carried revolvers and ammunition. We assembled at Cloonamahon Sanatorium, which was a central spot for mobilisation. The attack was to be carried out by the South Sligo column which was composed of men who were on the run. The plan comprised the blowing in of the front door and surrounds with a home-made mine. Harry Brehony was to carry the mine and put it against the door. The barracks was a strongly fortified one, with shuttered windows which were loopholed for firing from and surrounded by a barbed wire entanglement. There was a high wall surrounding the barracks on three sides with a lower one in front. A narrow passage led through the barbed wire to the front door, just sufficient to take one man abreast or men in single file. It was believed that the garrison numbered somewhere between twenty five and thirty men, half of which were up and on duty at the one time. The Brigadier - Pilkington - was in charge of the attack, and he asked for Volunteers to form a rushing or storming party. This party was to rush the barracks as soon as the explosion took place and before the garrison would have time to recover from the shock caused by the explosion. Commandant Deignan and I and eight others, as far as I remember, volunteered for this party of which Pilkington took personal charge. We were armed with revolvers. We were numbered off 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 etc. and were to enter the passage through the wire in that order. I was number six. A party of riflemen were posted in the Fair Green to cover us off. Their duty was to cover our retreat from the barracks or, in case firing started from the barracks, they were to open fire on it. The remainder of the Volunteers who mobilised

were detailed into parties to cover the roads leading to the town and prevent reinforcements from getting in.

We took up a position in the order mentioned under cover of the high wall and just around the corner from the entrance to the barrack. Brehony carried the mine in a sack on his back and in his stocking feet. He made his way through the barbed wire via the passage mentioned and placed it against the door and took the cable leads back to our position and attached them to the exploder. When the mine was fired there was a terrific explosion and stones and glass were thrown into the air. The door was blown in and I understand the back door was blown out. We had to wait a few seconds until the debris had fallen and the dust and smoke partly cleared off. Pilkington then gave the order for us to advance and we followed him in single file. I was sixth in the line and just got inside the outer entrance gate when I was brought to a halt against the back of the man in front of him. Someone said: "Get back" and back we went for some distance. Pilkington now shouted "Come on" and we moved forward again, but again we got jammed in the same way. Again someone said: "Get back" and back we moved again. Pilkington now shouted again: "Come on" and we moved forward again. Now a shot was fired by someone inside the barracks and on this our covering party in the Fair Green opened up on the barracks and glass began to fly from the barrack windows. Firing from the barracks now started and we had to get away as fast as we could as we were now in danger from our own men as well as from the garrison fire. We pulled back to the crossroads on this, the eastern side of the town where there were some trees behind which we took cover. Here everyone started to ask everyone else what the so and so happened. Pilkington, after saying a few angry words to us, made off in the direction of Sligo. The firing

from the barrack was now intense and some bullets ripped through the trees over our heads and it was time for us to get out of there also. Deignan and I and a man named Coleman made our way back to Riverstown, where we put up at the house of a friend. So ended the attack on Collooney and it deserved a better fate. I never found out the reason for the jamming in the passage through the barbed wire and I don't think it was obstructed by the explosion as Pilkington, who was leading, gave no indication that it was. In fact, I believe that Pilkington actually entered the barracks and that it was he who fired the shot that started our men firing. I do not know if any of the R.I.C. were killed or wounded. I don't think there was. All our men succeeded in getting away safely and our only losses were some valuable ammunition. The barracks was repaired and continued to be garrisoned up to the end of the fight and was never attacked again. I have a distinct recollection, even to this day, that immediately after the explosion I heard a whistle blown inside the barracks and, if that is so, it showed a remarkable recovery from the shock of the explosion by at least one member of the garrison and, as events proved, they were on their toes very quickly.

This finished big operations as far as this battalion was concerned, but small operations of a nuisance value continued right up to the Truce, such as road blocking and trenching and cutting telephone communications, raiding the mails, etc. The area began to get very hot now and raids on houses by enemy forces were quite a regular feature and several members of the battalion were arrested. They raided our house for me one night but I was not at home. They arrested my brother and, having stripped him naked, brought him to Dromahair. I was on the run from that on. Coming

on to July I proceeded to Dublin to see if I could buy some arms. We had collected an amount of money by taking up the Dog Licences in the area and we also had raided the Court Clerk's office. I did not succeed in getting any arms in Dublin. I knew some people in the city and through them I was put in touch with the Quartermaster General, but all to no avail. I had not told the Brigade O/C. or got his permission to go to Dublin and when he went to Dublin subsequently he was informed of my presence there. A very poor view was taken there of my action and he was ordered to deal with me in a severe and proper manner. Pilkington undertook to have me courtmartialled. I was never brought before a court; Pilkington would not do that to me. I was back in the battalion area when the Truce came into operation.

The Truce was a blessing in that we could move freely once again and could get proper food and rest and it gave us a chance to tighten up on the organisation. There was no doubt that we could have carried on the fight as we were well "blooded" now and our morale was high. We had gained an enormous amount of experience and had learned how the enemy operated and how to outwit them, but the whole bogey was arms and ammunition, explosives and so forth. It was very hard now to make any captures from the enemy and we were depending on headquarters to supply us, but there did not seem much hope of their doing so. The only material that we made locally was buckshot for loading into cartridges and this was not a great success either. We did succeed in getting some explosives from the mines in Arigna, but this went to Brigade H.Q. who took charge of it. None of us thought that the Truce would last for long.

We had a battalion intelligence section organised within the battalion, but this was only of local value. We had no contact inside any enemy post. There were no

spies or informers shot in the area. We had suspicions about certain individuals in the area acting as spies for the enemy, but we were not able to trace it down to them.

Signed: Arnold McBrien

Date: 30th September 1953

(Harold McBrien)

30th September 1953.

Witness: Matthew Barry Comd't

(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

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